

NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY

THE NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

**BACKING DOWN THE GUNMEN: A STRATEGIC APPROACH TO
REDUCING FARC'S THREAT TO COLOMBIAN SECURITY AND U.S. INTERESTS**

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Core Courses 5601/5602
Fall Semester, 2002

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Report Documentation Page			Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188		
<p>Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.</p>					
1. REPORT DATE 2003	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2003 to 00-00-2003			
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Backing Down the Gunmen: A Strategic Approach to Reducing Farc's Threat to Colombian Security and U.S. Interests			5a. CONTRACT NUMBER		
			5b. GRANT NUMBER		
			5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER		
6. AUTHOR(S)			5d. PROJECT NUMBER		
			5e. TASK NUMBER		
			5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER		
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) National War College,300 5th Avenue,Fort Lesley J. McNair,Washington,DC,20319-6000			8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER		
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)			10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)		
			11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)		
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES The original document contains color images.					
14. ABSTRACT see report					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF: a. REPORT b. ABSTRACT c. THIS PAGE unclassified unclassified unclassified			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 24	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON

While other armed illegal groups are significant elements of Colombia's security crisis, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) represents perhaps the most formidable single threat to Colombian, regional and U.S. interests.¹ Amelioration or elimination of the threat posed by the FARC would be a decisive factor in increasing Colombia's security. U.S. strategy should focus on supporting the Colombian government (GOC) in a two-track approach toward the FARC that offers a channel for political engagement and dialogue, while intensifying military pressure against the FARC's centers of gravity to compel it toward negotiations or eliminate or degrade the threat it poses over time. This paper will offer in Part I a national security strategy outline for approaching the FARC problem, supplemented by a specific military strategy (Part II).

Background

The FARC represents a recalcitrant and dangerous threat to Colombia's democracy and stability. The largest of Colombia's illegal armed groups, in four decades of almost uninterrupted conflict, the FARC has changed from a leftist revolutionary peasant army fighting for a coherent, if radical political agenda into what is, today, primarily a violent narcoterrorist organization with almost no political support in Colombian society.² While Colombia suffers from grave problems of economic inequality, and the FARC retains the language of class struggle in its rhetoric, it has not engaged in meaningful political negotiations in the context of a peace process in recent years.³ Even extraordinary efforts to engage the FARC in negotiations during the Pastrana presidency, including ceding huge areas of the country to outright FARC control, produced increased militancy and violence on the part of the FARC.⁴ The organization

does not evidence urgent interest in pursuing negotiated political solutions, and it is perpetuating itself through lucrative funding from narcotics trafficking, kidnapping and extortion.⁵

The size, range and violent nature of the FARC, its apparent disinclination to negotiate in realistic fashion, its continued vitality owing to profits from the narcotics trade and other crimes, and its potential for broader terrorist activities make the FARC the most substantial single threat in Colombia to Colombian democracy and U.S. and regional interests.⁶ A strategy is required to frame continued and increasing U.S. support to the Colombian government in its efforts to press the FARC to the negotiating table or to ameliorate through military means the threat it poses.

Part I – A Strategic Approach to the FARC

Assumptions

An overarching assumption for U.S. policymakers in framing a strategic approach to the problem of the FARC should be that the United States cannot be seen as taking a large-scale, direct combat role inside Colombia. It has been and remains doubtful that there would be strong U.S. domestic support for significant numbers of U.S. ground troops operating as combatants in the context of an internal struggle in the jungles and mountains of a Latin American nation. The U.S. government's (USG) current position is that the number of American and U.S.-contracted military and civilian advisors and technicians operating in Colombia in support of the GOC and Plan Colombia are sufficient for ongoing and expanded operations.⁷ Moreover, the Uribe government appears interested primarily in USG financial, technical and political support to do the job itself. International – and particularly Latin American – opinion would likely react with hostility to armed American involvement on a large scale. The post -September 11 American political consensus that the United States must attack terrorist groups globally has resulted in

expanded authorities for the USG in assisting Colombia against the FARC, which is identified by the Department of State as a terrorist organization.⁸ Supplemental funding legislation for the USG in 2002 has already sanctioned expansion of USG support beyond counternarcotics programs to support Colombia in broader counterterrorism and security efforts – e.g., protection of vital infrastructure against terrorist attacks.⁹ This trend clearly suggests U.S. political will to help Colombia to expand the fight against the FARC to a broader mission that combats the FARC as a terrorist entity, not just a narcotics trafficking group.

In Colombia, a primary political and operational assumption is that the new Uribe government intends to take a forceful line with the FARC and other armed groups that undermine Colombia's security. Uribe currently enjoys unprecedented levels of public support to use political and military means to press the FARC into serious negotiations or reduce it as a threat.¹⁰ This relates directly to the other primary assumption in Colombia: that the FARC will only negotiate, if at all, when it perceives that military pressures are threatening its capacity to survive and thrive.¹¹ The FARC's current disengagement from practical political dialogue, the corrupting effects of drug money on much of its leadership, together with the fact that many FARC fighters know no other life and may genuinely fear integration into the civil society of the nation, bode ill for meaningful negotiations in the near term.¹² Repeated efforts in recent years to engage the FARC in a substantive peace dialogue, including former President Pastrana's ceding of huge areas of Colombia to FARC control, have failed to bring the FARC into sincere negotiations.¹³ Instead, FARC violence and militancy have increased.¹⁴ Thus national will has to be manifest and increased military pressures applied. It should be assumed, based on experience, that the FARC

will react initially with increased violence and challenges to state authority as military pressures begin to bite.

In the region, it can be assumed that enlisting support for intensified action against the FARC on a political and operational level from Colombia's neighbors will be vitally important, but that there will be challenges to winning such support, given traditional Latin American concerns about U.S. involvement in internal affairs of regional states, especially among leftist governments (e.g., Venezuela, and soon Brazil).¹⁵ It will be important for the USG to engage often with governments with whom it may be possible to create political and tactical alliances in support of Colombia, maintaining transparency about U.S. intentions and plans and stressing common regional interests in stabilizing Colombia. Colombia itself should do the lion's share of diplomacy to encourage its neighbors to provide support. Internationally, it can be assumed that some commentators will continue to romanticize the FARC and criticize military actions against it. However, the decision by the European Union to classify the FARC as a terrorist organization will likely help undercut negative reactions in the political mainstream in Europe.¹⁶

National Interests and Threats

Under Points III and IV of The National Security Strategy of the United States of America, published in September 2002, the United States will seek to defeat global terrorism by working to prevent attacks against the U.S. homeland and friendly nations, and also will work with others to defuse regional conflicts.¹⁷ Hence, as reflected in the U.S. security strategy, it is in the U.S. interest to: work to deny the FARC areas and resources to function as both a terrorist threat, or as a potential support base for other terrorists; and support the democratic government of Colombia in its battle to regain control of its country and recreate conditions of basic security. An

additional key U.S. interest, as already recognized in the origins of Plan Colombia, is reducing the threat to U.S. society from narcotrafficking by the FARC.¹⁸

Looking at these U.S. interests and threats to them in more specific terms, the FARC is the largest and most dangerous terrorist organization endemic to the hemisphere.¹⁹ While the FARC has generally operated only within Colombia and in neighboring countries, it has established ties to other international terrorist groups, and controls large areas of land that could be used as safe havens and training areas for foreign terrorists intent on preparing attacks against the United States and others.²⁰

On a regional level, the insecurity within Colombia, a large democracy and U.S. ally, contributes to a sense of instability in the region generally. USG policies for establishment of democracy, economic stability and conditions for free trade in the hemisphere are threatened by the challenges to democratic institutions and state authority that the FARC and other illegal armed groups pose in Colombia.²¹

The FARC is deeply involved in international narcotics trafficking.²² Colombia produces the preponderance of cocaine-based narcotics utilized in the United States, where addiction to these narcotics causes heavy losses in life and social damage, both from addiction-related illnesses and the violent crime associated with narcotics usage and trade.²³ While there is ongoing need for demand reduction in the United States, the FARC and its narcotics activities constitute a threat to the welfare and prosperity of U.S. society in a significant sense, and are evident supply-side targets. Recognition of this threat is the part of the basis for the original USG Plan Colombia, and this remains important, even as concern with the terrorist and regional threats posed by the FARC have increased.

Foreign Policy Objectives

U.S. foreign policy objectives, then, are closely tied to U.S. interests and threats to those interests, to wit:

Winning the war on terror: The U.S. conception of a global war on terrorism emphasizes a community of nations that acts together to attack major terrorist threats worldwide, in a concerted drive to render terrorism unviable and unacceptable as a form of international behavior.²⁴ Thus it is highly desirable as a foreign policy objective to demonstrate the United States' will to put its concept into operation, by assisting Colombia in dealing with the largest indigenous terrorist organization in the Western Hemisphere.²⁵ Moreover, it appears that it is feasible to achieve this policy objective at acceptable costs, in light of: the consensus in the United States against terrorists groups worldwide, which has galvanized public support and opened the way for additional funding and expanded operational objectives; the FARC's lack of popular support; reinvigorated GOC resolve under President Uribe; the limited number of U.S. personnel on the ground involved in supporting U.S. and GOC efforts; and the successes by U.S.-trained and funded Colombian forces already seen in the field.²⁶

Enhancing regional stability: Creating a hemispheric community of democratic nations in which a stable environment promotes liberty and economic progress through expanded trade is a major U.S. objective.²⁷ This objective cannot be fully realized so long as major democratic allies are destabilized in substantial ways by internal armed groups involved in insurgency, narcotrafficking, terrorism and other attacks on national authority and public safety. It is desirable as a foreign policy objective for the United States to contribute to overall regional stability by helping the GOC to reassert state control over its territory and eliminate or reduce the threats to Colombian democracy posed currently by internal armed conflicts. It appears feasible

at present to take on this mission, in light of the resources available to USG agencies and the resolve of a new GOC enjoying broad public support for efforts to defeat illegal armed groups. Containing undesirable “spillover” effects in other nations as the FARC feels pressure in Colombia and maintaining regional alliances against the FARC will be two key challenges to realizing the objective.

Reducing narcotics trafficking: Damaging and disrupting major supply sources, routes and criminal organizations involved in narcotrafficking that affects the United States are a standing objective of U.S. foreign policy.²⁸ This objective now dovetails importantly with the war on terror, because, as in the case of the FARC and other groups, narcotrafficking is used to fund terrorism programs.

Power and Resources

The United States can bring considerable power and resources to bear in protecting its interests and advancing its policy objectives through supporting the GOC against the FARC on a number of levels:

Political efforts by the GOC to attempt to engage the FARC in a new dialogue can be supported by the U.S. expertise gleaned from other peace processes regarding specific proposals, commitments and modalities for secure negotiations towards a settlement.

Diplomatic efforts can be undertaken by the USG and GOC to marshal political and diplomatic support in the region, as well as internationally, for a concerted multinational effort to pressure the FARC to enter into serious negotiations.

An information campaign that highlights the FARC's degradation from a social movement into a narcoterror organization can be utilized to discredit the FARC further domestically and internationally.

Economic and development aid and assistance that helps improve the circumstances of Colombians in areas most affected by narcotrafficking can be continued and enhanced. Community development projects that build stronger ties between isolated areas and the nation as a whole, as well as enhancing state presence in remote regions, should be new priorities.

Military pressure that attacks the FARC's centers of gravity and increase the impetus for it to sue for negotiations and political settlements is key to success. A detailed discussion is found in Part II.

Plans and Priorities

The national interests at stake in Colombia and the threats to them posed by the FARC, as outlined above, argue for a coherent U.S. strategic plan for continuing and enhancing its support for the GOC in a sustained effort against the FARC. The assumptions about current political contexts – e.g., strong support in the United States and Colombia for dealing with terrorist groups – as well as the considerable power the United States can bring to bear make the moment promising for undertaking such a strategy. A two-track approach, in which the political conditions for bringing the FARC into serious negotiations while simultaneously applying coercive pressures (military) to compel the FARC forward into peace talks or reduce it as a major threat, holds out the most promise. Below are the primary elements for this strategy:

Engagement: The GOC, with USG support and guidance as required, should offer a political channel for re-initiating a dialogue with the FARC. At present, President Uribe is not willing to meet with the FARC directly, but has expressed willingness for third-party communications, if the FARC declares a cease-fire, renounces further involvement in narcotrafficking and releases its hostages and prisoners.²⁹ These conditions are imposed as a matter of principle for the GOC, and are probably also necessary to avoid charges that the GOC (and the United States indirectly) are prepared to deal with an unredeemable terrorist group. There should be no illusions about the easy inclination of the FARC to abandon its involvement in narcotics, although the FARC may, as in the past, show a willingness to call a cease-fire and release some hostages.³⁰ In addition to Uribe's conditions, the political channel will need to contain the following elements:

- A proposal for developing a format incorporating ideas from successful peace processes in the region. El Salvador, Guatemala and perhaps Peru-Ecuador could be considered as possible models, with elements from each process considered as parts of a "recipe" that is appropriate for Colombia. Major regional actors with peace negotiation experience and broad credibility, such as Brazil, should be encouraged to play possible mediator or guarantor roles. Alternately, the Organization of American States (OAS) or the United Nations might serve in this role.
- A proposal for confidence and security building measures, under international supervision, for safe re-integration into civil society of demobilizing FARC personnel against whom no specific criminal or human rights charges exist (questions of a general amnesty or "truth commission" arrangements could be considered separately by Colombians). This is particularly important in light of the negative precedent, surely not lost on FARC personnel, of the fate of many M-19

guerilla fighters, who were killed in reprisals and score-settling following that group's abandonment of combat and re-integration into Colombian society.³¹

Diplomacy: The USG and GOC, working bilaterally as well as in the OAS, should embark on a vigorous diplomatic campaign to enlist regional support. The emphasis of the diplomatic message will have to be that the FARC's (and other armed groups') continued existence as threats to Colombian and regional stability and sources of narcotics and possible terrorism pose a threat to the whole hemisphere, and a unified effort is required. There will be significant challenges, especially in two of the most critical nations, Venezuela and Brazil, where leftist governments will be skeptical of U.S. intentions and suspicious of U.S. intervention. However, while Venezuela under Chavez remains a question mark, criminal violence and attacks on public authority related to narcotics in Brazil have reached such a dire level that public demand for aggressive action against traffickers may make regional cooperation a possibility, even with a new leftist PT government.³² Another focus of diplomatic dialogue will need to be reassurance to those nations most vulnerable to "spill-over" impacts as pressure increases on the FARC.

Information: The USG and GOC will need to mount an information campaign that capitalizes on the exasperation felt in the Colombian public toward armed groups that terrorize society, building a persuasive case that the moment has arrived for decisive action and total support for the GOC's actions, and exploiting positive developments for maximum public relations value (building a sense of momentum in the public).

Foreign Aid (non-military): The original premise of Plan Colombia that the problems in Colombia must be addressed on a range of fronts – economic, social, civil – beyond law enforcement and military questions remains valid. Foreign aid and assistance programs that

help build economic and occupational alternatives to narcotics production and shore up civil institutions are crucial elements for success.

Compellence: As noted earlier in this assessment, application of pressure, primarily military pressure, is likely to be the critical factor in compelling the FARC into serious negotiations. Indeed, absent such pressure, the experience of recent years indicates the FARC will not negotiate, and will remain a major threat. The pressure will need to be applied concurrently with most or all of the non-military instruments of power outlined above. The GOC, with USG support and guidance, will need to apply sustained and intensifying military pressure to the FARC's centers of gravity, with a view to coercing the FARC into a ceasefire and negotiations. If this pressure fails in bringing the FARC into a peace process in the near term, then it must be sustained over time to gradually eviscerate it as a substantial menace to Colombian society. Part II below discusses in detail the military strategy required.

Part II – The Military Dimension

The overall political setting and main objectives for a strategy against the FARC were discussed in Part I in the context of considering assumptions, national interests and threats to those interests, and foreign policy objectives. Hence this section on the military dimension of a counter- FARC strategy will proceed directly to a focus on the military strategic setting, military objectives, military capabilities and vulnerabilities, strategic concept and probable results.

Military Strategic Setting

As discussed in assumptions above, the United States will not engage in large-scale, direct combat actions in Colombia against the FARC. As noted in Part I, there are substantial U.S.

domestic, regional and international political constraints on such large-scale U.S. involvement.

Rather, the character of the war will be an intensifying campaign by the GOC's forces -- supported, trained and sometimes guided by U.S. elements – to attack the FARC's centers of gravity. Counter-insurgency tactics will continue to be important in the conduct of military operations, especially in terms of reducing the FARC's areas of control and reasserting state authority and presence. Conventional and “indirect” (including special operations) capabilities can be brought to bear in attacking other centers of gravity.

Military Objectives

USG and GOC stated military objectives, which directly support the political objectives outlined above in Part I, are to attack the FARC's centers of gravity with a view to convincing the FARC leadership that continued combat will threaten the survival of the organization and that only negotiations hold out some eventual benefit to the organization's cadre. An implied objective is achieving damage to the FARC over time that is sufficient to ameliorate the threat it poses, regardless of FARC decisions on negotiations. The FARC 's centers of gravity that are vulnerable to attack will be outlined and discussed in the Strategic Concept section below.

For its part, the FARC's military objectives must, at this stage, be presumed to center on its survival and consolidation of areas under its control, where it can challenge state authority and maintain bases and routes for narcotics production and trafficking. As noted above, political objectives appear less than secondary to the FARC at present. The centers of gravity of the GOC and USG that are vulnerable to the FARC remain much the same as in the past:

- The state's lack of presence and control in areas of the national territory : the FARC will likely attempt to create a sense of broad insecurity and state ineffectualness by attempting to kill or kidnap government and civic leaders, increasing its efforts as the GOC increases pressure.
- Public opinion: As in the past, the FARC can be counted upon to attempt to deflect blame for violent developments onto the GOC and USG, charging their collusion with right-wing paramilitaries and implication in human rights abuses.

Military Capabilities and Vulnerabilities

Regular GOC armed forces continue to face serious problems of training, preparation, equipment and lack of adequate respect for human rights, but there is improvement and the counternarcotics units trained and equipped by the United States are developing a solid performance record.³³ Expanding such training and equipment to additional units with counter-narcotics, counter-terrorism and security roles should provide the enhanced capability over time needed to carry out the strategic concept outlined below, especially if the GOC and USG are creative and flexible in the mix of training and forces brought into service (e.g., increasing special operations capabilities and funding transportation assets for rapid-reaction deployments). Large areas of the country remain “no-go” zones for government forces on the ground, but the GOC, supported by the United States, has dominance of the air. In the current political environment, per the discussion in Part I, the USG should be able to bring impressive resources to bear in support of the GOC in the near term.

The FARC retains advantages in terms of its continued mobility, ability to hide and evade, and capability to attack targets of civil authority – kidnapping senators, threatening governors –

seemingly at will. Its narcotics wealth assures that it maintains a flow of funding for purchase of weapons and other materials, as well as training from foreign terror experts.³⁴ Nonetheless, its expulsion from some of the area conceded by Pastrana has reduced its safe havens, and it has no significant military air capability or rapid transport assets. Its command and control may prove vulnerable to disruption (see below) and USG intelligence collection.

The relative balance of forces should turn, eventually, in favor of the GOC, as newly trained units and additional resources are brought on line, with broadening USG support. The military objectives should be achievable over time, if applied along the lines of the Strategic Concept described below.

Strategic Concept

As the stated military objective is pressuring the FARC into cease-fire and negotiations, with an implied objective of damaging the FARC to the point that it ceases to be a major threat, whatever its posture regarding negotiation, those objectives should be pursued aggressively and together. Hence GOC forces, supported, guided and in some cases augmented by U.S. assets, will focus sustained attacks on the FARC centers of gravity in a coordinated and generally simultaneous sequence. At times, one focus of effort may exceed another in pace, depending on tactical and other factors. The overarching intent is to apply the pressure simultaneously across a diffuse battlefield that is both within Colombia and in the surrounding region. Translated into more specific terms, achieving the objectives will be accomplished by the following approaches to the FARC centers of gravity, outlined and discussed herewith:

FARC freedom of movement and zones of control. A centerpiece of President Uribe's plans is diminishing the FARC's freedom of movement and reasserting state authority and presence,

utilizing additional troops to pursue and attack FARC forces, establishing local militia systems to protect isolated communities and improving information coordination.³⁵ The USG can support these objectives with military and related capabilities in the following ways:

- Real-time intelligence sharing: In the wake of September 11 and in view of USG classification of the FARC as a terrorist organization, there now may be the potential to remove previous restrictions on sharing of key USG intelligence with GOC forces regarding the FARC's movements and operations.³⁶ Before, only intelligence directly related to the FARC's narcotics activities could be shared with GOC forces.³⁷ In the near future, the USG may be able to direct additional assets to provide critical, often real-time intelligence on the FARC deployments, basing and operational intentions to the GOC forces, facilitating qualitatively both offensive and defensive tactics and operations.
- Reinforcing local defenses and infrastructure security: The USG should support GOC plans to establish local militia forces by providing resources, weapons and training in military organization of volunteer forces that includes both tactical doctrines and human rights awareness (to help preclude dissolution of community militias into paramilitary or death-squad organizations). The USG can further encourage and facilitate programs that integrate local defense with civil action projects that promote national unity. U.S. advisors can facilitate development of information systems that alert centrally based GOC forces to impending attacks on remote communities, and help establish rapid-reaction GOC military units with capability to deploy quickly and in force to endangered areas. (While there may be inevitable and skeptical comparisons to the "strategic hamlet" program in Vietnam, Uribe should receive USG support in his effort to re-establish conditions of basic security and state presence in Colombia.) Similarly,

ongoing USG plans to assist GOC forces in protection of vital infrastructure, especially oil pipelines, should be intensified with enhanced resources and training.

FARC command and control. The evolution of the FARC toward a narcoterrorist organization has also seen an evolution in its organization and command and control structure. The introduction of narcotics-related wealth into the FARC's cadres has led to a loosening of its command structure and discipline, as local "fronts" become increasingly autonomous under local commanders who dominate the narcotics activities and other operations in their zones of control, much like sub-chieftains in organized crime.³⁸ While this may present problems for negotiations in the event that some local FARC leaders refuse to participate some day in negotiation efforts directed by their senior commanders, it also presents opportunities to disrupt the organization and break it down into weaker, separated components. The USG can assist the GOC in exploiting this possibility with the following tactics:

- Deception, disinformation and disruption: The USG should utilize a range of intelligence, special operations and unconventional warfare assets to support the GOC in developing special programs and covert actions that can sow dissent within the FARC's command structure and create distrust and dysfunction among the separate fronts and commands. The corrupting effects of narcotics wealth on and the relative isolation of some FARC commanders should facilitate this. Concerted special and covert programs could eventually riddle the organization with a degree of suspicion and lack of coordination that render it far less effective.
- Targeting of command and control nodes: The USG should support the GOC in development of tactics and training of highly-mobile, high-quality special operations

units capable of attacks against FARC command and control nodes even deep behind FARC lines. Whether air or ground assets, these units would neutralize FARC command elements in surprise attacks, while avoiding decisive battle with FARC forces that might otherwise enjoy a numerical or tactical advantage in the area in question. Facilitation of real-time intelligence to the GOC by the USG should enhance the potential for success of this tactic.

FARC sources of finance and regional support infrastructure. Recognizing that the FARC's primary economic and material support flows from its involvement in narcotics production and trafficking, this center of gravity would be attacked with the following tactics and resources:

- Degradation of cocaine production and processing within Colombia: The USG should continue and enhance programs to assist the GOC in aerial spraying of cocaine crop areas, appropriating additional funding as required for increased spraying. In addition to continuing and expanding training for and support of the GOC's counternarcotics brigades, the USG and GOC should also develop and fund new tactics and assets for more aggressive destruction of crop areas and production facilities, including armed infiltration by specialized GOC units that can mount on-the-ground hit and run missions against crop areas and processing labs that are located by USG surveillance assets but are not entirely vulnerable to spray operations.
- Air bridge denial across the region: The USG should move aggressively to re-establish legal authority and increase resources for supporting governments in both Colombia and Peru in operations for air bridge denial, i.e., hot pursuit and interdiction (with lethal force as required) of aircraft involved in narcotics trafficking. The USG should also engage in discussions with Brazil with a view to supporting Brazil's implementation of its aerial

interdiction law, passed in 1998 but not yet in force.³⁹ These actions should proceed in tandem with a vigorous USG effort to establish with Colombia, Peru, and Brazil (Venezuela's cooperation will likely prove problematic) a regional “common operating picture” (or COP) of aerial traffic in the Andes and Amazon. Operationally, this COP concept would be built in large part on integration of surveillance data from USG assets, including Relocatable Over the Horizon Radar systems (ROTHR) in Puerto Rico and Texas, with data generated both by sensors already in place in the region, and most importantly, Brazil's sophisticated new USD 1.5 billion SIVAM Amazon Surveillance System.⁴⁰ The SIVAM system will provide coverage, using ground radars and aerial surveillance platforms, of the majority of the Amazon region, including the “dog’s head” area of Brazil bordering key cocaine production and FARC-held areas, as well as the Brazil-Suriname frontier areas, where aerial narcotrafficking and gun-running by the FARC occur.⁴¹ Brazil will also soon bring on line over 70 ALX Super Tucano interceptor aircraft, based in the Amazon and with aerial interdiction as a prime mission.⁴² Hence a coordinated operational and diplomatic effort by the USG on invigorating authority and capability for aerial interdiction, underpinned by a state of the art technical capability for a common operating picture that facilitates hot pursuit and interdictions across the airspace of Andean and Amazon countries, could potentially strangle much of the aerial trafficking that supports the FARC’s narcotics activities.

Potential Results

It would be imprudent to underestimate the difficulties involved in mounting a sustained campaign of military pressure against the FARC’s centers of gravity, as the FARC has shown

itself to be a robust, adaptable guerilla force which has undoubted advantages in fighting on its home ground. A number of serious risks and potential costs must be acknowledged. In the early phases of the campaign, particularly while GOC forces are still being trained and restructured, they are likely to suffer some battlefield and tactical defeats, and may sustain serious casualties. The FARC may well try to sap GOC and Colombian public resolve through terror attacks in urban areas, as well as a guerilla war of attrition against GOC forces and government personnel in the countryside. Serious early losses could deflate the current popular sentiment for defeating the FARC. President Uribe and his government will have to show extraordinary leadership in keeping Colombian society galvanized and in the fight. The USG also will need to provide the best training, support and intelligence possible to minimize risks and casualties for GOC forces. Another risk that may be associated with successful application of pressure to the FARC is an increase in regional “spillover,” as neighboring countries suffer negative side-effects – i.e., influx of narcotics producers or refugees, increase in border area instability. From the outset of Plan Colombia and the ARI, USG officials have been sensitive to this risk, and it will be important to establish effective diplomatic and intelligence mechanisms for assessing whether spillover effects are doing critical damage, and work with Colombia’s neighbors to help them address problems in early stages. Finally, USG leadership will need to keep a steady gaze on its ends and objectives in Colombia and closely relate those at all times to its means and ends. “Mission creep” that could see direct American involvement beyond a level acceptable in the U.S. or the region must be avoided, as significant American casualties, loss of focus and degeneration of strategy into reaction and improvisation are all costs that could prove unacceptably high even to a U.S. government and public eager to help Colombia.

Despite the hazards, a sustained and intelligent application of military pressure may well compel the FARC to question its continued survivability as an illegal armed group. The United States has the military, technical and intelligence systems necessary to accomplish the mission of supporting the GOC in such a military campaign, and to do so at acceptable costs, recognizing that it will take a period of several years to reach comprehensive success. The successful application of military pressure will be the key factor in compelling the FARC toward the meaningful negotiations it has resisted, or failing that, reducing the FARC's threat to Colombian society. It is vitally linked to achieving the political objectives that protect U.S. interests at home and in the region.

Conclusion

The FARC is but one piece of the problem threatening Colombia, but it is arguably the most important enemy of security and stability in that country. Negotiations in good faith and with U.S. and international support have been tried in the past, most significantly during the Pastrana administration, to no avail. Colombians clearly now wish to re-take control of their country and their future by creating the basic conditions of stability and security that every democratic nation needs to thrive. To do this, they have to back down the gunmen, slowly but surely lessening the power and threat of illegal armed groups. In the case of the FARC, the strategy of engagement plus compellence outlined above offers a way ahead for the United States to support Colombia in this effort, with reasonable prospects for success over time and at acceptable risks and costs for the United States.

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¹ U.S. Department of State, Patterns of Global Terrorism, 2002, 2002 (Washington, DC: GPO, 2002), 107.

² U.S. Department of State Desk Officers in the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Issues and Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, interview with National War College students, September 27, 2002, Department of State, Washington, DC. (Henceforth referred to as DOS interview.)

³ Ibid. See also chronology of FARC-Colombian Government negotiations in The Center for International Policy's Colombia Project, available at <http://www.ciponline.org>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ John A. Cope, "Colombia's War: Toward a New Strategy," Strategic Forum, No. 194, October 2002, 3. Reference also DOS interview.

⁶ Ambassador Lino Gutierrez, National War College Faculty member and former Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs, interview with Dennis W. Hearne, October 9, 2002, The National War College, Fort Lesley J. McNair, Washington, DC. (Henceforth referred to as Gutierrez interview.)

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Patterns of Global Terrorism, 107.

⁹ U.S. House of Representatives Conference Report (107-593), "Making Supplemental Appropriations for Recovery From And Response To Terrorist Attacks On The United States For The Fiscal Year Ending September 30, 2002 And For Other Purposes." July 19, 2002 – ordered to be printed/GPO. Washington, DC. (Hereafter referred to as HR Report 107-593.); available at <http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov>.

¹⁰ DOS interview.

¹¹ Gutierrez interview.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ronald Hilton, "EU: Colombia's THE FARC Added to Terrorist List," July 17, 2002, available at <http://www.stanford.edu/group>.

¹⁷ The White House, The National Security Strategy of the United States of America, September, 2002. 5 and 9.

¹⁸ U.S. Department of State, Fact Sheet: Plan Colombia, February, 2001. Department of State, Washington, DC.

¹⁹ Statements by Ambassador Francis X. Taylor U.S. Department of State Ambassador-at-Large for Counter-Terrorism, in remarks to House Foreign Relations Subcommittee, October 10, 2001, Washington, DC.

²⁰ U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on International Relations Majority Staff Report, "Investigative Findings On The Activities Of The Irish Republican Army (IRA) In Colombia." April 24, 2002. Washington, DC. (Hereafter referred to as HR Report on IRA in Colombia.); available at http://www.house.gov/international_relations/findings.

²¹ Gutierrez interview.

²² United States Ambassador to Colombia Anne W. Patterson, Remarks in Keynote Speech at Center for International and Strategic Studies (CSIS) Conference on Colombia, October 5, 2002, Washington, DC. (Hereafter referred to as Patterson CSIS remarks.)

²³ DOS interview.

²⁴ The National Security Strategy of the United States, September 2002, 6.

²⁵ Statements by Ambassador Francis X. Taylor, U.S. Department of State Ambassador-at-Large for Counter-Terrorism, at press conference at the Organization of American States, October 15, 2001, Washington, DC.

²⁶ Patterson CSIS remarks.

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²⁸ DOS interview.

²⁹ Ibid.

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³⁴ HR Report on IRA in Colombia.

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³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid. See also: Phillip McLean, "Colombia: Failed, Failing or Just Weak?" The Washington Quarterly, Summer, 2002, 130.

³⁹ This information is based on the writer's coverage of this issue as a Foreign Service political officer at the Embassy of the United States of America in Brasilia, Brazil, 1998-2002.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.